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To: ICWA Newsletter Recipients

From: Peter Martin 

What follows is Tom Goltz's Newsletter Number 34, from which I've removed the cover-letter page. It was a bit personal in nature.

For the record, you should remember that Institute newsletters are not for publication without the writer's specific consent. And posterity should know that Thomas Goltz is an ICWA Fellow researching the Turkic-speaking republics of the former USSR.

CHAPTER EIGHT (Georgia On My Mind)

It all began with a story idea I had for a certain newspaper in London--flying around Nagorno Karabakh on a helicopter while Armenia guerrillas took pot-shots at the aircraft from below.

"What fun," said Matthew from his editorial easy chair, "But we have a different assignment for you. We want you to go find whatshisname."

"Who?"

"The Georgia guy--the fascist character they just got rid of."

"You mean Gamsakhurdia, the President."

"Yeah, that's the guy," said Matthew, "We heard you on the radio. You said he was in Azerbaijan."

This was true.

A day before, the BBC had called about a rumor that Gamsakhurdia had arrived in the North of Azerbaijan after fleeing the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, in the wake of what was described as a populist coup.

It was, to be sure, but one of many rumored sightings of Gamsakhurdia.

But I managed to confirm that he had indeed come to Azerbaijan but, had not exactly been welcomed with open arms. After five hours of waiting around in the city of Ganje, he had gone to Armenia to seek asylum there.

If this was thin soup, it was the strongest brew anyone had enjoyed on Gamsakhurdia in awhile, and I thus became the BBC's News Hour man of the moment.

The funny thing was that I knew next to nothing about Gamsakhurdia or the situation in Georgia.

I had never met the man, never been to Georgia and my information about him and his country was limited to the Moscow evening news and the BBC itself.

True confession:

When I spoke to the BEEB (as we in the trade call the British Broadcasting Corporation) I studiously avoided mentioning Gamsakhurdia's name: unsure of the pronunciation, I identified him with formulas like 'The Georgian leader' or 'The President' lest I reveal a stunning lack of knowledge of my subject by mispronouncing his name.

But I had been on the BBC, and ~~was~~ thus, by universal definition (and that feckless manner in which news is usually produced) I was an expert.

And now, as an expert, I was supposed to produce on demand.

That meant finding Gamsakhurdia.

Second True Confession:

I was not an expert.

But for professional and ego reasons, I could not say so.

I tried to couch this in other terms.

Why, I asked the editor, do you want to focus on some guy that has been in the news for months when the smoldering problem of Nagorno Karabakh had been left virtually untouched?

And why, I further asked, do you want me to run the peripatetic president to the ground when he happens to be in a neighboring state that is in a virtual state of war with the country in which I live?

There was the problem of access, I pointed out.

Besides, I said, it was Wednesday--and the parachute hack-pack from Moscow would be dropping in on Gamsakhurdia's Armenian redoubt, thus making whatever I could do for the Sunday paper totally redundant and uninteresting.

No, said Matthew, we want the interview. Do what you can.

Ok, I said, increasingly worried about the thematic and logistical problems involved, I'll try.

Third True Confession:

I did not.

I had already booked a berth on the train to the Azeri city of Agdam just outside Nagorno Karabakh and was determined to go there.

The world press had been hammering away at the Georgia Story for weeks, if not months, while scarcely a word had been written or aired about Karabakh--at least from the Azeri side.

I further rationalized the decision in the following way: if I did not hear a report on the BBC that someone else had not already gotten to the deposed president, I was still part way to the border with Armenia and thus in a good position to effect the exclusive conversation--if the Armenians would let me in and if Gamsakhurdia chose to speak at all.

So I got on the train in Baku at night and got off in Agdam in the morning. There, I tuned in the radio to the BBC and learned, not to my surprise, that the Georgian President had spoken with Reuters from the seat of his exile, expressing bitterness about his fate.

I sighed with relief.

The Georgia Story was over.

There was no need for me to proceed with the interview, and I could go on with the business at hand in Nagorno Karabakh.

Specifically, it was time to go back to an Azeri enclave--within-the-Armenian enclave, a small town called Khodjali.

I got aboard a dangerously overloaded helicopter, and went in. It was a mind-numbing, terrifying flight and incredibly stupid for me to be aboard the ME-8 chopper at all, but there I was.

So I spent the night and part of the next day before getting into a different helicopter to cork-screwed back up and out and sail back to Agdam, where I picked up another chopper--lift back to Baku.

I duly wrote the helicopter/Khodjali story and then filed it to the newspaper.

Matthew said it would not run.

He still wanted Gamsakhurdia.

"We want Gamsakhurdia," he said with determination.

"What do you mean," I groaned.

"TASS reports that he has left Armenia and is back in Georgia," Matthew said, "He's in a place called--hghmm, let me look at my map--its a place called Zugdidi. He has called for the start of civil war."

Great.

Out of the pan and into the fire.

"Matthew," I began, "What is this obsession of yours? What's wrong with doing something interesting and unique on Karabakh? Why join the hack-pack and chase after some poor presidential guy whose name we can't pronounce and who has been avoiding the press? And even if I find him and he wants to speak to me, how do I find a phone to file from in a dump-town that no-one has ever heard of before, located in the middle of a country in the midst of civil war--and all before your miserable Saturday deadline, which really means you want a file on Thursday and that means tonight, doesn't it?"

"A Friday file would be nice," Matthew offered, giving me 24 hours for the task.

"Matthew," I stated the obvious, "This is impossible."

"I know. But if anyone can do it, its you."

SOB.

Ego-stroking of ego-maniacal political adventure writers is hitting below the belt.

How could I say no?

So I said yes.

"Ok, Matthew," I said, "I'll go on your wild goose chase. But next time..."

"Talk to you tomorrow," spake Matthew, booking the line space in his paper, "Got to run."

Then he hung up or the line went dead.

Tomorrow, I said to myself, and laughed.

I figured I could stretch that into two days: one to prove the impossibility of finding Gamsakhurdia, and the second to write about whatever else I found.

Parachute journalism at its superficial worst.

But it was an excuse to get my feet wet in Georgia.

The Quest for Gamsakhurdia had been joined.

It would be, ultimately, very instructive concerning the Azeri experience as well.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia had been in the news for months, and most information about him was pretty negative.

'Authoritarian', 'Dictatorial' and 'Insane' were some of the terms employed to describe the Georgian leader.

It was the conventional wisdom.

Most thought it was true.

Maybe it was.

But the most remarkable aspect about this appraisal was that it was a 360 degree turn around in perception. Because up to the break up of the Soviet Union, Zviad Gamsakhurdia had been celebrated as the next-best thing to Andrei Sakharov or Vaztslav Haval.

Gamsakhurdia was a committed dissident, with several stints in jail to prove it.

Gamsakhurdia was an intellectual, and had several translations of important books in three or four European languages into Georgian on his c.v.

Gamsakhurdia was the founder of the Georgia branch of the Helsinki human rights watch committee, and a hero of the April 9th, 1989 revolt in Tiblisi, when the Soviet army rolled into the capital to put down a nationalist rally.

Indeed, Zviad Gamsakhurdia seemed to have done all the right things at the right time with one exception:

He got elected, and was obliged to make good on some of his campaign promises, like removing Georgia from the USSR.

And not everyone in the country wanted that.

And a lot of people outside the country didn't want that at all.

So perceptions about Gamsakhurdia changed.

They said power had gone to his head.

Gamsakhurdia began showing 'undemocratic' tendencies--like closing down opposition newspapers and locking up opposition leaders who disagreed with either the pace or purpose of gaining independence.

His reputation was further tarnished by his deep antipathy toward (former) Soviet Foreign Minister and fellow Georgian

Edvard Shevardnadze, who typified the 'new' Soviet man in the fading days of the empire for many outsiders.

The Shevardnadze legacy in Georgia is remembered rather differently. ~~People~~ recall that the international statesman and trout-fishing pal of James Baker III was once the Communist Party boss in Stalin's homeland.

But Gamsakhurdia apparently did not care what people outside Georgia thought of Shevardnadze, and he did not care what they thought about the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev.

He even went on record as saying 'good riddance' when Gorbachev was temporarily putched from power on August 19th, 1991, thus putting himself in the camp of the 'hard-liners' and conforming his alleged tendencies toward 'authoritarianism' in the opinion of the pro-Gorby pundits around the world.

But Gamsakhurdia's antipathy for Gorbachev (and Shevardnadze) might seem less an indication of an anti-democratic nature than continued 'anti-Centerism' pure and simple: both Gorbachev and the putchists represented the meddling hand of Moscow in the internal affairs of Georgia.

And it was Gorbachev, after all is said and done, who ordered the tanks to roll into Tbilisi in April 1989.

Still, in the eyes of the world that waited with baited breath while Boris Yeltsin stared down the putchists and put Gorby back in power, Gamsakhurdia was identified as a bad guy, a supporter of the bad guys, and deserving of the fate of the other bad guys--IE, being putched from power himself.

In early September, anti-Gamsakhurdia demonstrations began at the university.

These were led by well-meaning people with degrees and good English. They were identified as 'intellectuals.'

Opposing them were country-rubes and just-folks with shot-guns and pitch-forks and a generally bad attitude who supported Gamsakhurdia. They were identified as 'fascists.'

In October, Gamsakhurdia was banging heads in South Osetia, another obscure ethnic enclave problem similar to that of Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan, where a minority that was a local majority with kith and kin in a neighboring country (in this case, Russia) decided they wanted to secede.

And in November, Gamsakhurdia was once again refusing to play ball with Gorbachev to save the old Union.

From all indications, he was a problem for a lot of different people and it didn't surprise many when Georgia was singled out as one of two bad-boys by US Secretary of State James Baker III during the secretary's 'State of the USSR' address at Princeton University.

Georgia, the Secretary announced, was undeserving of American aid and assistance until the Gamsakhurdia government began adhering to democratic ideals like the other recent converts to pluralistic democracy in the former Soviet Union--like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and, of course, Russia itself.

The other renegade state on Baker's 'black list' was Baker was Azerbaijan.

It was more than passing strange that it was these two former republics--the Baltic states excepted--that were most adamant about actually achieving independence and leaving the USSR.

One even got the impression that U.S. government policy was to keep them in Moscow's orbit, whether they liked it or not.

Thus Gamsakhurdia's Georgia became a pariah, unloved by East and unloved by West because it was unloved by the other.

The last straw was Gamsakhurdia's refusal to take part in the series of meetings in December that led to the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Initially, Gamsakhurdia stayed away because he had no intention of going.

Then he stayed away because he couldn't go if he had wanted to: the 'Opposition' had begun a new series of strikes and demonstrations in Tbilisi and the situation was rapidly spinning out of control.

Gamsakhurdia had a revolution on his hands.

The much-oppressed Opposition--the aforementioned 'intellectuals'--had decided to save the country from his capricious, dictatorial rule, and bring Georgia back into the international fold.

In real terms, that meant bringing Georgia back into Moscow's orbit, and nearly everyone--including old Cold Warriors--applauded the idea.

Everyone, that is, except for the majority of the citizens of Georgia who had voted ol' Zviad into office because he promised to make them free.

But what about the opposition?

What about those brave dissidents and intellectuals resisting Gamsakhurdia and his dictatorial ways?

Nightly, news clips from the Georgian capital showed determined men in ski masks spraying automatic rifle fire down the main streets while army units aimed artillery pieces at the Presidential Palace at point blank range.

It was an incredible sight, terrifying and sad and there was something not quite right about it all.

Because as the death toll mounted it became pretty clear that it was the Gamsakhurdia loyalists--the fascist rabble--who were doing most of the dying.

Often, they fell while holding signs of their beleaguered chief in their hands, trying to remind the world that a full 87% of the population had elected him and that many still were willing to give him their final vote.

The Opposition, meanwhile, were the guys doing most of the shooting, and from the looks of them on the television and in newspaper photographs, the idea that they were 'intellectuals' and 'democrats' began seeming increasingly obscene.

They were putschists, pure and simple, and ones equipped with a pretty healthy arsenal of heavy weapons for being a bunch of college professors and poets.

You didn't have to be a loony believer in Grand Conspiracy to understand what was going on.

You had to be an idiot not to: they had been supplied by someone else so that one Georgian could kill other Georgians with greater ease.

The Center, Moscow, was putting paid to Gamsakhurdia's idea that Georgia might be free.

And there were still those who had the audacity to claim that it was democracy in action that was doing it.

Put the situation in your own electoral district.

An official is elected with an overwhelming majority in May, and six months later the 13% of the population who didn't vote for him bomb him out of the municipal building because ^{they} want him to go.

If you were one of those who voted for him or her, how would you feel about it?

There were a lot of disappointed democrats in Georgia.

The end appeared to come on January 5th, when Gamsakhurdia managed to extricate himself from his palace-cum-bunker and fled to Azerbaijan--allegedly with all the gold in the state treasury of Georgia.

The Azeri authorities, as I reported at the time, were not gracious hosts.

Gamsakhurdia spent five hours, in vain, trying to contact President Ayaz Mutsalibov via the telephone.

Ayaz would not answer.

Next, Gamsakhurdia went next door to Armenia.

The authorities there had reportedly said they would give him asylum in order to end the violence in Georgia.

But the putshed-president also experienced a very attenuated welcome, and at the first rumor that he might be deported back to Georgia to stand trial for his crimes against the state--including the allegation that he had heisted all the gold in the treasury--he suddenly blew the coup and vanished into thin air.

Some thought he had managed to fly out of Armenia to the Chechen-Ingush capital of Grozni in the north Caucasus, where a former nuclear bomber pilot-cum-president was making the Russians uncomfortable with his own plans for independence.

Others said he had merely changed planes in Grozni, and had flown to the western Georgian city of Suchumi, traveling by road from there to the area known as Mergalia, where he had reportedly announced the commencement of a civil war.

There were other rumors as well.

Gamsakhurdia was dead. He was captured. He was in a KGB jail in Moscow. He was in Turkey.

Truly, in all my years as a foreign hack, I have never run into an individual that managed to put up such a smoke screen.

Zviad was everywhere.

But the newspaper said that TASS had said he was in Zugdidi, and having no better ideas myself, it was to Zugdidi that I planned to go.

There were several logistical problems involved in doing so.

I didn't even have a visa for Georgia in good times, let alone bad ones.

And a country in the midst of a civil war is pretty bad.

The classic way around the visa business in the old Soviet Union was to travel by train.

But the train from Baku, often attacked by robbers, only ran as far as Tbilisi--and that was on the wrong side of the lines. After that, a pro-Gamsakhurdia strike by railway workers had brought things to a halt.

It looked like my plans had been derailed before they had even begun.

But a telephone call to a pal with connections in the air industry confirmed my fate: there was indeed a plane leaving the next morning from Baku to the Russian Black Sea town of Sochi, which was within striking distance of Zugdidi.

The visa problem was papered over with dollars.

A Fourth Confession:

I hate flying.

No, I loath it.

And I am no fun to fly with, I will tell you that right now.

I sweat and shake and clutch the seat at the slightest unsmooth move of the aircraft and at the most ordinary sounds: flaps extending or retracting, wheels up or down.

The hum of the engines drives me nuts.

It is irrational, I know--especially for someone who drives a car (or generally lives) the way I do.

So, as usual, I took the easy way out: I took a large doss of a local, liquid anaesthetic to the nervous system, better known as alcohol.

The early morning drinking was, in fact, a fine introduction to Georgian culture, but of that, anon.

So I was at Baku airport the next morning, sipping local cognac in the foreigners' section, and chain smoking.

I had quit for New Years and been looking for an excuse to start again and this seemed like the right occasion: flying into a civil war in a country where I only imperfectly commanded the second language (Russian) and about which I really knew nothing.

So I addled my brain at an early hour, with the result that it was an easy flight and I did not sweat or blanch and when we landed I was sorry that I had started smoking again. I was quite high and really had no plan at all, save for finding some transport to deepest, darkest Zugdidi where a civil war was raging and where I would need my wits about me and a good pair of lungs to run on if and when anyone started shooting.

In anticipation of the last eventuality, I had worn a pair of tennis shoes that were a size too small (in Baku, you buy what you can get).

The problem was that while such foot-wear might have been reasonable in the mild mid-winter of Azerbaijan, it was hardly appropriate for the snow-capped mountains along the northeastern Black Sea coast.

It was cold and there was snow everywhere.

Why couldn't it be summer revolution/putsch, and me a Black Sea bum?

Because Sochi was lovely and I instinctively knew it would be a place to come back to spend some leisure time.

But leisure was for later, and the task at hand was to get to Zugdidi.

Oh, no, said every taxi driver at the airport, its too dangerous!

What about Suchumi, I tried.

Too dangerous, too!

I'm willing to pay, I offered, and soon I was ensconced in a big white Volga and roaring down the coastal road.

My driver was a Russian bear by the name of Vlodi and his assistant was a half-Georgian/half Russian character named Meri, or something. It wasn't clear.

They lectured me in Russian on subjects I could only vaguely understand even if I had possessed good Russian, which I didn't at the time, although it is much better for their effort to force communication on me.

I had initiated a course of Russian language study in Baku a month or two before, taking several hours of instruction a day and a lot of constructions and words started falling into place as we drove along the road, chain smoking my cigarettes.

I said Ya dumio sto ja ponimayo when I thought I understood and Ya ne ponimayo when I knew I didn't.

Then other verbs and nouns started kicking in:

They Shot/They Killed/They Will Shoot/They Will Kill/They Are Crazy/You Are Crazy/We Are Crazy And Someday We Won't Tolerate It And Then We Will Revolt.

I was going through a crash language course--learning Russian on the Run.

"I can't take you beyond Suchumi," Vlodi said, "It is dangerous. Apasna. There is war. Vayna. There are bandits. Holligani. They shoot. Vistrilaiot. They kill. Ubivaviut."

Actually, the only bandit that I encountered was Vlodi because he overcharged me by several thousand percent for a journey that was, finally, no more apasna than driving from Livingston, Montana to Gardiner at the head of Yellowstone Park during Elk season: there were a lot of men with guns sulking along side the road, but they weren't pointing the weapons at us.

And the countryside was lovely, even exquisite: long stretches of beach pounded by the Sea and trout-filled rivers cutting through pine-covered hills into the misty interior. It all begged exploration with a graphite rod and pocket full of flies.

I said: I want to come back here sometime.

In between the rivers and wooded ravines and misty hills were small towns with quaint, two story civil architecture and onion-domed Russian churches and more ancient, conical-domed sacral structures built by the Georgians.

It was a fine drive, that winding, coastal road to Suchumi.

Then there were the pigs.

Big pigs, little pigs, white pigs, grey pigs.

Big daddies wallowed in slush and mud puddles, rooting around for truffles while huge sows with extended, multiple teats wandered across the road, pursued by tiny oinkers.

There were so many pigs that they were a traffic hazard, and we had to swerve out of the way a few times lest we inadvertently create pork pie on the highway.

It was enough to drive a good Muslim to drink, and I realized that I was back in the Christian world.

By the time Vlodi dropped me at the railway station in Suchumi, evening had fallen and it was raining rain that threatened to turn into snow.

"Come on, Vlodi," I tried to persuade the driver one more time, "Let's go see what's what in Zugdidi."

But no amount of pleading would convince him that we should continue toward the civil war together.

"I am a married man with children and the Georgians are crazy," he said.

He was kind enough to arrange a braver driver for the rest of the route, though, and invited me back to Sochi sometime to hunt and fish and drink and watch the patience of the Russian nation be stretched beyond the breaking point.

"Come in the summer," he said, "It is warm then and there will be a revolution."

Then he was gone and I was in another, much smaller car, an older model Lada, I believe, and we were racing toward Zugdidi in the gathering night, skidding on ice-slicks formed on bridges over darkened rivers with check-points at both ends.

The driver kept up a non-stop conversation.

"You like Suchumi?"

"I didn't see much of it."

"It is a fine town, especially in the summer--Russian girls, Ukrainian girls."

"Sounds dandy."

One of the great mysteries of speaking in a foreign tongue that you do not know well is that it is always easier when your interlocutor is not a native speaker. I don't why this is so but it is: My Arabic always greatly improved when I spoke with someone from Japan; while learning, my Turkish was at its best when I was speaking to Kurds and my German top notch when dealing with a Bulgarians or Yugoslavs.

In the present situation, my partner in the car spoke a highly accented and very badly structured Russian--just like mine, so we got along fine.

"Why are you going to Zugdidi when you could stay in Suchumi?" the driver reasonably asked.

"I want to find Gamsakhurdia."

"Sirz Shervadnadze!" crowed the driver, apparently praising the former Georgian leader and fishing pal of James Baker III.

"Well I'd like to meet him, too."

"What?!"

"I just thought that--"

"The dog should die!"

"Who?"

"Shervadnadze! Long live Zviad!"

"Why do you like him and not Shervadnadze?"

"Because the dog is a Georgian and Zviad is Megralian."

"What is a Megralian?"

"It is a Georgian, too."

"And we are now in Megralia?"

"No, we are in Abkhazia."

"What's that?"

"Abkhazia is the part of Georgia where the Abkhazians live but there aren't too many of them. Most people who live here are Megralian, and everyone of us is Georgian except for the Abkhaz and the Ajars and the Osetians and the Meskhits, but we got rid of them a long time ago."

"All of them?"

"No, just the Meskhits, and they want to come back but we won't let them."

"Why?"

"Because they aren't Georgians."

"But you said that Georgians were the same as Megrilians."

"I was talking about the Meskhetians, not the Megrilians."

"Oh."

"So who is civil war between?"

"Civil war?"

"Yes."

"There is no civil war. At least not yet. That was last year."

"Well, what's the problem then?"

"The problem today is between the Position and the Opposition."

"You are the opposition?"

"No! I am Position! I am Gamsakhurdia!"

"But your man isn't in power so you must be the opposition."

"No! The Opposition are the traitors who love Shervadnadze and Moscow and who want to destroy the nation. We are the Position!"

It was going to be complex, trying to define who was who around here. And by the time I got to Tbilisi several weeks later, the Opposition had embraced the concept of Position and had begun to call the Gamsakhurdia loyalists 'the opposition', but of that, later.

Then I asked the \$64 question, just to keep things straight.

"What is the Georgian word for Georgian?"

"Sakartvelo!"

So we ground on through Sakartvelo, or at least the Abkhazian part of it, until we crossed some darkened river and entered the Megralian part of it. And after about two hours we finally entered the outskirts of Zugdidi, which was still in the Megralian part of it, I think.

Snow was everywhere and it was cold and my feet were frozen.

"Well," I asked the driver, "where can I find Gamsakhurdia?"

"You don't know?" asked the driver in amazement, "I thought you knew. I wanted to meet him, too. You mean we have come this way and you don't know where he is?"

"No, I don't know. They say he is here."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody you know. The BBC, quoting TASS."

"They lie."

"Well, that may be so, but let's just try and find him or someone who knows where he might be."

"Well, let's try the Prefectura. There's usually a crowd around there."

We drove through the slushy, snowy streets of Zugdidi until we came to the middle of town where several broad streets converged on a large, circular ploshad, or square, in which a huge bonfire was burning. Scores of people were warming themselves around it, coughing.

Facing the square was a large, four story building of an unprepossessing, commie-character, out of which people were hauling bits of broken desk and chair to stoke the fire.

A huge Georgian flag was hung from the third floor balcony over-looking the square, and a man was shouting into a microphone.

Gamsakhurdia himself?

I paid off the driver and began working my tennis shoes through the slush and ice and snow of the parking lot toward the main door of the building.

"I am a foreign correspondent," I announced myself to the wicked-looking, bearded man with the Kalashnikov guarding the entrance, "And I wish to speak with your leader."

"Up there," growled the guard, pointing to some darkened stairs leading to the floors above.

I paused on the third floor, crowded with people milling about in the pernumbral light provided by candles and flash-lights.

"Where is the leader?" I asked again, and was shoved into an even more crowded chamber packed with gun men.

"Who are you?" demanded a suspicious, short, thick-set man dressed in a ski cap and camouflage jacket. Sticks of dynamite stuck out of both pockets.

"A correspondent," I said, "I want to talk to your leader."

(The reader will forgive me; 'leader' was a new word I had just learned, and I was determined to use it.)

The man indicated that I should sit on a broken table while he went to inform his boss of my presence and request.

It was incredible.

My impossible mission was really going to succeed.

I had flown into Russian without a visa and managed to get to the eye of the Georgian tornado in one piece and was about to meet the elusive big man himself!

And from all appearances, I was the first journalist to track down the peripatetic president.

That much desired, dreamed of 'exclusive' interview.

I started preparing my questions.

Sir, what do you think about having been putsched from power?
Well, it has not been very pleasant...
It all seemed too easy.
It was.
Read on.

As I waited for my interview with the president, a crowd of bearded and scruffy-looking men ebbed and flowed through the smoke-filed foyer, jabbering away in Georgian, or its Megralian dialect, anyway. It was my first contact with the tongue, and it seemed to be a language with more Q, K and X sounds than Arabic, German and Xhosa combined.

Writing down the person and place names was quite a chore.

My favorite was the Ztxenisztali river.

Curiously, though, I discovered I knew a few words of Georgian, or at least in its Megralian dialect: not only were there cultural transplants from Turkish/Arabic like Khalk (the people) and Teriuman (translator) but even greetings like mudierok (how are you?) and Varsi vorsi (fine, thanks) that I had picked up from the Laz, who live along the eastern Black Sea shore in Turkey.

I had heard about the putative 'cousin' connection between the Laz and the Megrilians before in the sense that both claimed descendant from the ancient Cholchis, from whom Jason stole the Golden Fleece (with the aid of the Cholchis princess, Medea).

It was a little odd, chatting about such things with knots of fierce looking men who had not shaved in a fortnight and probably felt like hunted animals, but that was the subject of discussion until a young man with a shot-gun slung over his shoulder stumbled into the ante-chamber and started coughing out the news.

Instantly, the jabbering in the ante-chamber was silenced until the new arrival had said his piece, answered a few pointed questions and then crashed through the door leading to the inner sanctum to deliver his report to the Position leadership.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"Kutaiyise," he said, "The dogs have attacked again!"

At first I thought that Kutaiyise was a person, but it was actually a city--the district capital of the next province over from Megrulia, where a pro-Position meeting had been held earlier that day. Several bus loads of Gamsakhurdia loyalists had driven up the road from Zugdidi in order to stage a non-violent demonstration. But somewhere on the outskirts of town, the protestors' way had been blocked by national guardsmen, who then opened fire. Several were wounded, and, reportedly, one killed.

"They terrorized us with airplanes," maintained one man who had been there, describing how the column of buses had been buzzed by a MIG-29 fighter. "Moscow is on their side."

This was the first taste I had of the tendency to inflate the other side's war-making capability. The MIG-29 is one of the most advanced (former) Soviet jet fighters. There might be a squadron stationed in Georgia somewhere--but the idea that the fighter could be leased to buzz a column of civilians in the mountains seemed rather far fetched.

Clearly, however, the president would have to evaluate this most recent attack, and so I returned to my chair before someone took it to throw on the fire outside and waited.

And waited some more.

And some more.

Finally, after about an hour, I elbowed my way through the knot of men guarding or maybe just inadvertently blocking the door to the inner sanctum, and reiterated my request for the interview.

"I want to speak to your leader," I said.

"He's not here," came the reply.

"But you said he was an hour ago," I replied, "I must conduct an interview with him so I can tell the world about his views."

"He's not here."

"He is."

"No he's not."

"Yes, he is."

"No, he's not. Take a look if you don't believe me."

"All right I will."

So I burst in through the door (actually, it was opened for me) and entered the Position HQ.

It was filled with smoke and smoking men, who looked up from their intense conversations to see who had entered.

Me.

Then they went back to their cigarettes and discussion.

A couple of characters were chewing on pieces of bread ripped from two huge, twenty pound loafs.

I scanned the tables, and realized that I really didn't even know what Gamsakhurdia looked like.

That is, there was no-one in the room who even vaguely resembled the picture of the president I had seen pasted to the outside of the building outside.

"Sirs," I said, approaching the Position leadership collectively, but aiming at a man sitting at the head of the table, who, although he didn't look like Gamsakhurdia, was clearly the man in charge, "I want to speak to your leader."

"I am that man," said the fellow at the head of the table.

I later learned his name was Walter Shagua.

"I want to speak with Gamsakhurdia," I told him.

Instantly everyone in the room was around me.

Where is he? You know where he is?

I had, it was clear, neglected to add the verb 'want' to my construction, and the Position leadership had assumed I was a messenger from the leader.

They were more disappointed than me when they realized that this was not the case.

I clearly didn't know where he was.

And neither did they.

But it was rather clear that he had not, as reported by TASS and then the BBC, announced the commencement of civil war the day before on the balcony of the building I was standing in.

He had been nowhere near the building, the neighborhood or town of Zugdidi at all.

But I was not the only person disappointed in not finding Gamsakhurdia in Zugdidi.

Predictably, the TASS balloon report about his return to his home town and declaration of the start of civil war had sent the world press into motion, and within half an hour of my initial interview with the Position leadership in the town, the hack-pack arrived.

There mission was, not surprisingly, the same mission as mine. Find Zviad!

There was Bridgette Kendal of the BBC and her husband who represented some British television concern; there was a guy from Reuters; a fellow I named Colorado Chris, an American working for Ajans France Press in Moscow, with his side-kick photographer Misha, the son of a Ruskie dip stationed in DC (and a graduate of Howard University). There was a large CNN contingent led by a an older guy who kept on muttering that he was 'too old' to do this stuff, and then a pack of other Figaro/Guardian/El Pas correspondents and photographers plus a few stringers from (former) East Bloc newspapers and magazines as well as the odd representative of (former) USSR news organs, like TASS and the Russian News Agency and Moscow News and Niisavisimi Gazeti and even something called the Baltic News Service.

It was, as I say, the hack-pack.

And as soon as they had all arrived, the Position HQ did the reasonable thing. They held a press conference.

Walter Shagua spoke long and eloquently about what had happened in Georgia; he spoke of the past, the present and the future.

There was, however, only one question anybody wanted to ask. Where was Gamsakhurdia?

The answer, delivered in different ways according to the question, was always the same: We don't know.

It was all pretty sad and disappointing.

You call a party and the host doesn't show.

The other journalists had somehow made arrangements to stay together at the only working hotel in town.

I forget its name and I am glad I did not stay with them.

In addition to the general news incest that such circumstances produce, the place was freezing, had no water and had no kitchen or cafe.

The only thing it had was electricity to run the satellite phones that all the news agencies and television teams were traveling with and dependent upon.

Instant images to the world, if little sense.

Me, I stayed at a home near the Prefectura--a normal sort of two story Georgian house with a garden and a chicken coop out back, all guarded by a vicious dog.

It was nice a clean and pleasant but still pretty chilly, even if it did have gas.

Of course it had no phone.

And as a result it didn't have the incestuous hack-pack hanging around all the time, embellishing each other's stories, both contemporary as well as historic.

Although any student of sociology 1001 understood what was happening--like attracting like--it certainly was a mentality that I didn't and don't like at all. It was all masturbation, jawing about the different wars and coups that one had lived through, sharing apocryphal tales about fabulous expenses charged by one's distant colleagues to one's institution (the story of a Figaro correspondent who always added a line item expense for whoring that he called a WANMOW--We Are Not Made Of Wood--was a favorite) as well as relating cynical predictions of the future, when few, if any of the Purveyors of Truth ever seemed to actually get out and mingle with the masses, as it were.

And then there was the 'news' side of the story.

The hack-pack was there, so there had to be news in order to justify its presence.

But the news was pretty thin.

Walter Shagua could only condemn the fascist junta in Tbilisi so many times.

True, the Position was blowing up the odd bridge in order to prevent the Opposition from assaulting the town, but usually there was a second bridge nearby that was left unscathed, or a railway tressel parallel to the blown bridge that could be used by cars and trucks as well as trains.

But each blow bridge became headline news.

'Forces loyal to the ousted Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia on Tuesday blew bridges leading to the beleaguered city of Zugdidi in order to stop the inexorable approach of Georgian National Guard, the force determined to crush resistance in the western part of this divided, former Soviet Republic.

That sort of thing.

And when Shagua got tired of confirming or denying bridge-blows, others at the Prefectura came to the aid of the news-hounds, supplying rather dubious statements allegedly from the invisible leader--like Gamsakhurdia's call to create a national army when the nation he was calling on was gone.

'Sources close to the ousted Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the beleaguered city of Zugdidi on Wednesday said that he has called on the nation to create a national army to oppose the inexorable approach of National Guardsmen controlled by the military junta currently in power in Tbilisi. The junta, who seized power after a popular coup in late December, are determined to crush resistance in the western part of this divided, former Soviet Republic.'

When I saw the BBC, Reuters and AFP huddling around and comparing notes on this non-story that had been fed to them, in my presence, by some non-entity character in the Prefectura because they couldn't find anyone else to talk to, I knew that it was time to re-institute my old adage--namely, that if you see another hack, you must be in the wrong place.

So I shoved off on my own, or at least tried to avoid the hack-pack to the extent possible.

I hung around the Zugdidi market.

There was, strangely enough, plenty of pig on sale.

I also found a pair of Red Army officer boots that were only two sizes too large, but better for the snow and slush than the tennis shoes I was wearing that were one size too small. *my landlady*

And I got to spend long hours with Lamara and her family and neighbors, chatting about the past and the future, usually over a vial of the vicious Georgian spirit called chacha--the Mau Tay fire-water that the Armenians also specialize in making.

The story told by Little Lamara (the diminutive used to distinguish her from her larger sister-in-law and neighbor by the same name) and her family and everybody else I spoke to was the same.

They, the Georgians, had been screwed.

Screwed bad.

They had believed in and dreamt of actively sought to create that thing called democracy but when they went and got it by electing a president they wanted because of his promise to get them free of the USSR, the people who had been saying it was so good and essential to have democracy decided that the populist democrat Gamsakhurdia was bad and that the one party communist Shevradnadze was good.

They were very disappointed with the West, the news media and a lot of other things most people take for granted, Big and Little Lamara and their families, they were.

So were most people in Zugdidi and all the other towns and villages in western Georgia I went to, usually on the pretext of finding Gamsakhurdia.

I went to Poti to find him, and failed.

I went to a place called Abasha, where the Position had erected barricades on their side of the river in order to stop the Opposition from crossing, and failed to find him there, too.

I went here and I went there, and so did other members of the hack-pack during that cold January of 1991 in western Georgia.

We were all looking for Gamsakhurdia, but only finding each other--and then pretending that we didn't know what the others were looking for or who the others were.

It almost started to look like a journalistic version of Waiting for Godot, this cold and dreary Quest for Gamsakhurdia, but with a twist: if Godot was a Bechetsque morality drama, a sort of absurdist Bildungsroman on stage, from what I could see, none of the other seekers were being edified in any way.

Obsessed with meeting the man, they could not discern the idea.

The point, I finally decided, was the search for the reality of what happened when one tried to establish even a distorted and warped version of democracy in a former Soviet Republic.

But none of us wanted to see that.

It was too painful.

It was too sad.

It ended in utter and complete disillusionment with the ideas that 'we', as 'Westerners,' had long embodied for 'them.'

They had believed.

And we had let them down.

And now all we had time for was the funeral.

The journalistic one, that is.

It was pretty disgusting.

One day I woke up at Little Lamara's and announced I was going.

I was still infected by the news angle business.

I said I was going to Suchumi.

Maybe I could find Gamsakhurdia there.

Lamara cackled her cackle, and openly wondered why I still needed to find the man, the man that she loved.

But I had made arrangements to travel with an alcoholic Georgian poet by the name of Rene who I had got drunk with the night before. We had knocked back glass after glass of home-made Megrelian wine and ate a sort of hominy grits-like porridge with bits of cheese stuck in it that the locals called mamaliya, or something like that, and Rene convinced me that he was an intimate friend of the ousted President and would set up an exclusive interview for me in Suchumi.

I had nothing better to do so I believed him, and we set off together over the nasty, icy roads back to the port city and then checked into his apartment on the outskirts of town. This was on the sixth floor of a standard Soviet high-rise, and the lift didn't work because there was no electricity.

As a matter of course, the toilet was removed from the sink, but this didn't matter too much because without electricity there was no water anyway. I was starting to become grateful that it was so cold because if it had been warmer we all would have started to smell, but it was cold and so we didn't or at least

didn't notice because we never removed one article of clothing, even to sleep.

And because we drank a lot.

We drank a bottle of cognac that night while Rene extolled the merits of Gamsakhurdia. Then we continued drinking when we got up in the morning, starting in on the cognac we had not drunk the night before and opening another bottle. Rene was determined to finish the whole thing but I was insistent that we stop before we got totally smashed. It was not yet nine in the morning.

This tendency to drink was normal activity in Georgia.

Most people cannot believe the drinking stories travelers relate about the place, and suspect that most are exaggerations.

Believe me, they are all true.

I drink heavily but I have never seen anything like the way people of Georgia go through booze.

Rene told me it was part of a tradition that began in the mists of time, The Cholchis, or original Megrilians--and thus all Georgians--were the people who first learned how to cheat wine from the grape and then brandy and cognac from the dreges of the barrel. The perfidious Greeks, and through them, the Romans, Italians, French and Spaniards, had stolen this aspect of Cholchian culture along with the Golden Fleece, and then claimed it as theirs.

This was almost cultural genocide, Rene assured me: the Megrilians--and thus Georgians--were the most ancient culture on earth, but because of their location, they had been doomed by history to remain a suffering, noble and neglected people.

Rene was some sort of national poet, and given to big cultural ideas like national poets tend to be. As such, I was obliged to listen to a lot of cultural fare. A lot of this was fine talk on the courage and genius and general merits of Gamsakhurdia, and the intimate relationship between the poet and president.

Whether this was true was hard to say.

But this was: Rene, like all good Megrilian Georgians, drank like a fish.

And here is something else that is true: the home-made Megrilian sauce was good and strong and even in the middle of a crisis that was looking like civil war, there was always plenty of drink to be had and time to drink it.

Like at eight o'clock in the morning.

It was an attitude I kind of liked--up to a point.

With Rene the poet, that point came around noon the next day, when he insisted that we retire to yet another cafe for another meal of mamaliya and another two bottles of cognac before he lead to his personal friend, the president. Or at least to some other personal friend who knew where the president was.

And at four in the afternoon, when we ended up at that someone else's house to eat more mamaliya and drink more wine and make more endless toasts to the memory of the president and eternal friendship and to the day when Georgia might be free of the Soviet yoke, I was getting very cold, drunk and angry.

I mean, if the locals didn't want to produce their president for that all important, exclusive interview, then they might as well say it--but I was getting pretty tired of using the Quest for Gamsakhurdia as an excuse to open yet another bottle in another freezing household, illuminated by candle light.

So we went back over to the train station where Rene said the Position was said to have its headquarters, but the headquarters wasn't there anymore.

They had been moved downtown, into the local branch of the Georgian National Theater, named after Gamsakhurdia's father, Konstantin, who was, or had been, also a great nationalist and a poet to boot. Rene thought this was a good occasion to open up another bottle but I didn't quite see the connection and so I ditched him then and there and made my own way to the theater where a bunch of people were meeting in the dark and smoking cigarettes and talking about what to do.

And it was there that I met Nunu.

She was the commercial director of the theater, but had thrown open the doors of the building to use as the Gamsakhurdia HQ.

She was thus politically active.

She was also incredibly beautiful.

She was a Cholchis Princess.

She was Medea.

She was a raven-haired beauty with dark almonds for eyes and, from what I could guess beneath her multiple sweaters and coats, she probably looked pretty good on the beach.

She was also tough as nails.

She also had a sister named Nina who was just as beautiful and tough and intelligent as her.

I thought it was love.

But I couldn't decide which one I was in love with.

This made things a lot easier because I realized I wasn't serious but just kind of sweet.

Both of them played along, periodically reminding me that we could barely understand each other and that I happened to be a married man.

Then I decided it was Nunu who I loved more than Nina.

Nunu then reminded me that she was running the national theater building that had been given over to the Position as their last redoubt, that the Free Georgia radio station on the third floor make-up room above the stage was off limits during broadcast times, that she had rallies to attend to and that she really didn't have a lot of time for courtship at the moment.

Still, I courted her in my own way, usually through the agency of one of two members of the parliament in exile, Nika or Merab, both of whom spoke English, as well as through another, very non-descript woman named Ema who spoke German and Italian and who seemed to be falling in love with me, or at least was always following me around.

When I finally left Suchumi for the last time, Ema gave me her business card.

Her family name was Gamsakhurdia.

So I ditched Rene the Poet and tried to take up with Nunu the Cholchis Princess but got stuck with Ema, but in the meanwhile I ran into a lot of other people, all of whom were greatly disappointed in the world's response to the putsch against their president and were increasingly irritated with journalists whose only concern was learning where he was to be found.

"He is everywhere," said a Nika, the first time we met, "He is in the East, in the West, he is here and there and all around!"

At first I thought the man was mad; later, I understood that he was a member of parliament who had seen his share of torture in Tbilisi before managing to escape, incognito, from the capital to join the resistance in Suchumi. And after we had become friends, I began to understand what he was trying to say.

Gamsakhurdia was not a ghost; he had become an idea.

It didn't matter where he was physically, even if he were physically in the grave.

He was the essence of Georgian independence that was being crushed, but struggled on, and would continue to struggle on.

He was Georgia.

I don't know where the other reporters were at this time; probably hanging around airfields and ports and following up yet another rumor that Gamsakhurdia might be found in this or that village or town.

He was never found by them or others, although he did eventually surface in Chechen-Ingush, with the former bomber-pilot president, Mr Dudayev.

Apparently he had been there all along.

But in Georgia, after the putsch, the only people who really wanted to locate him were the press, and they failed.

They failed to find both him and they failed to find what he stood for.

It was a great failure indeed.

And when the press realized they had failed, at least failed in finding Gamsakhurdia, they got bored and listless and then they left, and when they left I was alone.

But by then I had given up on finding the man.

I was looking for an idea.

One of my first stops was to the local man of religion, an anti-nuclear, anti-apartheid, anti-colonial and pro-liberation theology cleric, whose many books on these subjects over the years were part of the proof that despite it being officially an atheist state, the USSR was filled with religious people.

The cleric's name was David, and he was the Metropolitan, or bishop, of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

I had learned of his existence from an ecclesiastical pal of David's, the Very Reverend Preuss, who is very big man in American religious circles and just happened to be the guy who married my older brother to his present wife. I was the best man, and so at the reception following the wedding in St Paul, the subject of my up-coming trip to the USSR surfaced and Preuss gave me David's name and telephone number and told me to look him up, should I ever happen through Georgia.

I had left the relevant information in Baku--or was it Tashkent?--because I had assumed that the divine dwelled in distant Tbilisi and it was doubtful that I could learn much from a state-sponsored commie cleric, anyway.

But among other people who were his best friends, Rene the national poet had tried to impress upon me that he was also an intimate of the local bishop--David, and even gave me two of David's many books to read: "To Deliver the Oppressed from their Bonds" and "Live for the Sake of Peace and Justice." Both were really only a collection of pithy sermons and abstract thoughts on nuclear disarmament and Liberation Theology penned by a local man of religion, and they read like state-approved, theological schlock. The United States nuclear arsenal was the main threat to the world. Afghanistan was never mentioned in the context of a people struggling to be free.

But I recognized the author as being Reverend Preuss's David--and he was apparently bunkered down somewhere in the middle of Suchumi.

I called him up, gave him Preuss's regards and asked if I could come round for tea.

He said come around right away.

I did so, although it was brandy, typically, and not tea, that we imbibed--and well before noon.

I brought Nunu and he supplied his own translator, a Russian woman who spoke no Georgian, but had excellent English.

This was odd.

But it was a queer interview in a queer setting.

David looked exactly like his picture on the two books I had browsed through--and indeed, like the books said he looked: an old testament figure with a great, grey beard and long white hair tucked under the big black skull-covering caps worn by Orthodox priests. His speech was sprinkled with Biblical references and parables pertaining to local lore, and he tried to put on the same happy face that he was known for world-wide.

But the beard couldn't not hide the tense, drawn lips and the cap could not conceal the furrows of worry on the Metropolitan's brow. David, bishop of the Georgian Orthodox Church diocese of Suchumi and Abkhazia, was a man of religion faced with a very secular problem: his native land was being ripped apart by civil war, and the church was still searching for a position.

"The church has never been directly involved in local politics, but has acted as a keenly interested observer in human affairs--especially the concept of Justice," he told me, "But it is an indignation when a brother kills a brother--and that is the tragic situation that we are in."

The putsch had left the Metropolitan terribly and confused.

Because for the past decade, David had been one of the most conspicuous clerics of the former East Bloc on the world stage, participating in so many international conferences on peace and disarmament that he had come under criticism for serving as a flunky for the former communist regime.

"In my books, I have written about peaceful change in Africa and Central America, but I have also voiced my support for Liberation Theology--the active involvement of the church in local politics in order to promote justice and liberate the oppressed. But taking an active side in a civil war is difficult. If your 10 children are fighting, to whom do you give a stick to beat the others?"

David tried to duck the issue of talking about the official policy of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the current crisis. He said that he had been out of contact with Patriarchy in Tbilisi since the troubles began.

But when I pressed him on the subject, he finally admitted that while he didn't know the churches position, he personally condemned the January 5th putsch against Gamsakhurdia as an 'illegal act' that had brought sorrow and suffering to all in Georgia--a country that once regarded itself as a beacon of civilization and culture, but was now acting more like 'some place in Africa.'

"I cry and pray every night and have not changed my clothes in weeks," said David, "I urge the people to remain calm and pray for an end of the bloodshed. But the main thing is that I do not support those who attacked the parliament and drove the President into hiding. I not only disapprove of this, I condemn it."

The Metropolitan said he shared the suspicion that the putschists were encouraged by 'forces' in Moscow in order to re-include the country in the Commonwealth of Independent States, which Gamsakhurdia had refused to join, but declined a categorical comment until shown absolute proof that it was so.

As a cleric, however, he preferred to locate the root cause of the troubles on Godlessness.

"In the beginning was the word and the word was God," the Metropolitan quoted Scripture, "The main point of Christianity is to struggle with words and not guns. And this, is the present situation, means dialogue--and that means democracy.

"We had elections. We had a parliament. We had a president. If you don't like him, elect another. But to effect change in the political structure of the country through force of arms is to invite the destruction of the nation. The events of January will be written on black paper."

But David felt almost powerless in stopping his flock from self-slaughter.

"If Georgia were attacked by Turkey or America, I would not hesitate to take up arms myself," he said, showing me a picture of a 19th century Greek priest wearing a bandolier over his robes and holding up a rifle in one hand and a crucifix in the other, "But in this situation it is difficult. Still, I would not tell a fellow priest he had sinned if he were to take up arms to defend the president. Perhaps if I were a civilian, I would take up arms myself."

That was the formal part of our interview.

Then Nunu launched into him in Megralian, and I couldn't understand a word; nor could the Russian translator.

But it was pretty clear that Nunu had taken the occasion to come along for the interview not because she wanted to be with me, but as a chance to square some old scores with the patriarchy (and, I suspect, to invite him to go on the record about his condemning the putsch; I don't know if she succeeded.)

It was when I fell in love with her.

David then opened another bottle of cognac and got me and Nunu pretty drunk. We talked about his old friend Preuss, who I had to confess I didn't know very well. We spoke about Azerbaijan and his old pal the Sheikh-ul Islam, Thank God Son of a General. They had gone to many mutli-denominational religious conferences together, they had. I confessed again that the Sheikh and I were hardly drinking buddies, like the Metropolitan and I had become, but only passing acquaintances.

Time was getting on and we were getting ready to go.

"Perhaps you would like to use the toilet?" David suggested to me, and in fact I did.

I followed him into a nearby room, and then he shut the door.

We were in the vestments room and there was no toilet to be seen.

David's smile gone and all the tension he was feeling showing on his face.

"Please try and tell the truth to the world!"

Why the need for privacy?

Didn't he trust Nunu?

Didn't he trust his Russian translator, a woman who had been with him during his sundry theological missions to the world?

The he reached in his robes and brought out several hundred roubles, and pressed them into my palm.

"Take these, as a gift; I have nothing else to give."

It was a strange token, and one only worth about five dollars, by my reckoning.

"Why?" I asked, trying to refuse the money.

"Please take it, and tell the world," said the Metropolitan, "Something awful is happening in our country. Please!"

It was a strange meeting with a strange man, a priest, who after a career of preaching crap, was only now coming to grips with the black hole of Realpolitik in his native land.

So I took his token and did the only thing reasonable thing with it: I bought several bottles of cognac and donated them to the thirsty folks over at the theater.

There were rallies everyday on the quayside in downtown Suchumi. Sometimes my new pals Merab and Nika would speak; sometimes it was other folks I knew from the theater HQ; once Ema gave a pep-talk, and someone even helped an inebriated Rene the National Poet to climb aboard the truck that served as the stage and deliver a hoarse speech about something--maybe he was reciting one of his poems from memory. It was hard to tell and I didn't bother to ask anyone for a translation.

Another time (which rally? the days merged with one another as they went by) a personal emissary from Gamsakhurdia read a message from the underground leader, calling on the people to take heart and not despair, that democracy would triumph over fascism in the end, and a lot of other encouraging words that drove the crowd wild.

I did get a running translation of this from Ema, but when I went to take a look at the message itself, it became clear that it had been written about a week before.

Ema and the rally leaders didn't like that interpretation, but they couldn't deny the date.

One day, I ventured to a palatial structure set in a huge garden behind a wrought-iron fence on the southern outskirts of town to see if Gamsakhurdia was there.

He was not.

But the palace, which I learned was Joe Stalin's favorite Black Sea Dacha, was next to a hotel/spa that had its own sources of electricity, hot running water and even heat.

This was the height of luxury, and I immediately checked in, dreaming about how I could get Nunu back with me some night.

I never did.

But there were a few correspondents from former Soviet Republics staying there, and having nothing better to do than sit around a warm place and drink the nights away, I did that with them.

They had a lot to say.

The situation didn't look good.

The Opposition was slowly but surely closing the loop on the Position.

The port city of Poti was now under siege; a break in the weather--Georgia had just been hit with the worst blizzard in 100 years--had allowed an armed column of tanks and other motorized guns to cross the country, and after securing Poti, their next obvious target would be Zugdidi and then Suchumi.

But Suchumi was problematic, because in addition to being the last real redoubt of the Position, it was also the capital of Abkhazia--and the Abkhazians were starting to make increasingly anti-Gamsakhurdia (and indeed, anti-Georgia) noises.

They were starting to talk about independence.

Accordingly, I decided it high time to find a few Abkhazians to talk with about all this.

This was a rather difficult task, because there were not a lot of Abkhazians in Abkhazia.

As a group, they numbered only something like 100,000 people, or about 10 percent of the population of Abkhazia and only a fraction of the total population of Georgia.

So I decided that the best place to find an Abkhazian would be over at the government building downtown.

My reasoning was simple: as part of a package of concessions designed to cool Abkhazian nationalism, Gamsakhurdia had agreed that fully half of the Abkhazian parliament be reserved for ethnic Abkhazians, and that the local government jobs--traffic cops, stenos and the regional television station--also be reserved for Abkhazian employees.

The parliament of the Abkhazia Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was a big ugly Stalinist building with a statue of Lenin in front. That the territory still went by the old Soviet name and that Lenin still stood was strange. My Megrelian Georgian interlocutors tried to impress upon me that this was because the Abkhazian leadership consisted of nothing but old-line commies and Stalinists, but I think the real reason that the old symbols still stood was because the Abkhazians just didn't want to become Georgians because the Georgians said they should.

There was no one in the parliament that day, but after poking around the building for awhile I discovered that the local Abkhazian television station was near at hand, and dropped in.

There I met a stout young man by the name of Sylvester who worked as a local producer, and who had been assisting the BBC television team in Zugdidi to file their material.

We had dinner over at his house one night, and he was teaching me a few useful phrases of the language (Kamarjabut=Hello; Khushpaku=How are you; Itabup=Thanks) when I finally popped the question.

"What the heck is an Abkhaz?" I asked Sylvester, or something to that effect.

"The best way to find out is to ask the President," Sylvester replied, or something to that effect.

So he called up the President of the Abkhazia Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and said that there was a foreigner who wanted to talk with him about the nature of Abkhazia, and the president said yes.

Vladislav Ardzimba was a young, handsome and likable man who was an anthropologist by profession. He wanted peace with his neighbors, prosperity for his family and independence for his country.

It was not his problem if the Abkhazians were a minority in their own titular republic and that the (Megrelian) Georgians were the majority. This skewed ratio was the result of a deliberate process of colonization of the country by the Georgians, who had tried to culturally absorb the minority Christian Abkhazians while encouraging the majority Muslim Abkhazians to leave for Turkey and the other Middle Eastern states that once made up the Ottoman Empire.

I had lived in Turkey?

Really! Then I must know that all the villages around Adapazar and Sabanci Lake were Abkhazian. Hadn't I noticed that the houses looked essentially the same and that the food served in local truck-stands was different than that served elsewhere in Turkey?

Actually, I had never thought of this before, but on reflection it seemed plausible. But why did he think so?

Well, he was an anthropologist and Hittitologist by training, and had spent about a year in the museums and libraries in

Ankara, at which time he had plenty of time to go look for traces of Abkhazianness in west-central Turkey. And he had found plenty. The Turks, however, were intellectually lazy and used the word 'Cherkez,' or Circassian, to describe all the Muslim migrants from the Caucasus, without bothering to distinguish between the many groups.

When I suggested that this was probably because most of the Muslim migrants from the Caucasus to Turkey were by now assimilated into Turkishness, Ardzimba begged to differ.

Not only did they still retain their language and traditions beneath a thin veneer of Turkishness, but many were likely to return to Abkhazia once it achieved independence from Georgia, that is, once it had re-established the independence that it had enjoyed as recently as 1923. Delegations had been sent back and forth between Abkhazia and Turkey and other areas where the Abkhazian diaspora was strong; he was now actively pursuing the policy of inviting emigrants in order to rebuild the native population base.

Was the President, as a non-Muslim Abkhazian, not concerned that the religious differences between local Christian Abkhaz and returning Muslim Abkhaz might not make for future problems?

Not in the least, said Ardzimba. He and Sylvester and the young lady who served as the official translator (Russian to English) might all ~~be~~ nominally Christian Abkhazians, but they could all swear on the Bible that they were closer to the Muslim Abkhazians and other Muslim 'mountain' people of the northern Caucasus (Ingush, Chechens, Avars, Lezgis) than they were to the Georgians. In fact, it was Ardzimba's dream to join a free and independent North Caucasus Federation, a country that might also have room for Osetia--the other autonomous region of Georgia that was also trying to break away and join the autonomous Osetia that was part of the Russian Federation.

similarity This was beginning to sound an awful lot like the situation in Nagorno Karabakh, but with certain significant differences: the main ~~one~~ was that self determination in Abkhazia and Osetia meant immediate absorption by Russia, if under the auspices of the North Caucasus Federation.

The formal interview continued for about an hour, after which Sylvester and I and the translator went over to her house to have a few glasses of a deliciously deep homemade burgundy. It was well past three in the afternoon, and we had been woefully neglecting local habits and customs. While there, we were met by the translator's sister who had just returned from a year in the USA as part of an exchange program.

"There was still a Soviet Union then but everyone I met always thought I was a Russian because only Russian lived in the USSR," she recalled, "So I started to say that I was a Georgian, even though I knew I wasn't. And so one day I looked up my name in the local telephone book and discovered there were a few people with the same name. So I called them, and they almost screamed with delight. After that I met all the North Caucasus people in the region, and when I came home, I knew I was an Abkhazian and not a Georgian or Russian or even Soviet anymore."

There were Abkhazians now coming out of the woodwork, and I have to say I found them to be delightful and open and generally very nice people, and a people with a point: why should they be denied their own country when everyone else had one, even if they now only made up a tenth of all the people living in the place?

Reasons, Save one!

I couldn't think of many/ ~~but there was one~~: if you start turning back the clock, you have to wind it back to the dawn of time.

The next day it was bitterly cold and snow was starting to fall over the city, and a wind off the Black Sea sent huge breakers crashing into the sea wall. Several dinghies and even a small sail-boat had been swamped, but their very presence reminded me that this was probably quite an attractive tourist town in the summer and that it would be nice to come back and nuzzle with Nunu on the beach or maybe go trout fishing in the mountains behind the town.

Someday.

There was another rally along the quayside like there was every day, and as usual I ran into Ema and Merab and Nika and the other regulars from the theater; Nunu, and her equally lovely sister Nina, were no where to be seen.

When the rally broke up Ema wanted to spirit me away somewhere but I resisted her clutches and joined the boys at a sea-side, alfresco coffee stand and ordered some coffee that was cold by the time we had walked it from the booth to the stand-up table we had reserved.

Thomas, said Merab, we have a request for you.

Anything you need, I replied.

We want you to help us draft an appeal to the nations of the world.

I told them I was fast becoming an expert at writing appeals to the nations of the world, and would be happy to use my skills to help their cause. My most recent appeal, I hastened to add, had been so effective that at last count 45 countries had recognized the Republic of Azerbaijan as a direct result of my efforts.

So with fingers turning blue and the ink almost freezing on the paper, we hammered out the following:

Appeal of Georgian Parliamentarians

We, the duly elected representatives of the Georgian nation and members of the Supreme Council, or parliament,

Noting that the legally elected President of the country has been compelled to leave the capital in the face of brute force,

Condemning the state of terror in the land as the putchists continue to try and take control of the entire country,

Declaring their support for a national strike and continued acts of peaceful disobedience as the only means we intend to use to bring down the illegal regime now in power in Tiblisi,

Hereby request that the United Nations immediately send a delegation of qualified observers to access the situation in the country and to oversee the peaceful restoration of the legitimate government and its freely elected president, Zviade Gamsakhurdia

Signed---

Nika and Merab were so delighted with the text (or so inured to gallows humor) that they immediately proposed that a statue to me be erected on the Suchumi sea front, naked, with pen in one hand and document in the other.

I modestly asked for and received assurances that my monument have a fig-leaf and that the muscle-tone expressed in brass or stone would be appropriately flattering.

They agreed.

Then we went back to ^{the} chilly theater building and waited for new reports about the imminent fall of Poti and the siege being mounted against Zugdidi, warming ourselves with another bottle of cognac and illuminating the room with the aid of homemade candles--pieces of newspaper twisted for a slow burn.

It was all pretty depressing, when I reflect on it.

That night, I finally got to see Gamsakhurdia.

"Do you want to see Gamsakhurdia?" Nika asked me.

"Does a cat like liver? Do dogs have lice?"

"Then let's go!"

So off we went in a caravan of three cars, careening through the icy dark streets of Suchumi, eventually finding ourselves on the outskirts of town in front of a large house in a compound, facing a memorial to the Red Army. Someone within the compound responded to a pass-word, the metal gate was flung open, and we quickly drove in.

"You excited?" asked Merab.

"Yeah."

"Got your tape recorder ready?" asked Nika.

"I hope the batteries will hold out."

"Well, let's go inside!"

So we trooped in the house to see Gamsakhurdia.

At first I thought it was a reward to me for having been so helpful with the parliamentarians appeal; but something about Nika's smile suggested ~~something~~ ^{something else}.

We gathered in a large room along with maybe twenty others.

One chair was left empty.

A hush fell over the assembled, and then a man walked into the room.

It wasn't Zviad Gamsakhurdia, I knew that.

The man then turned on a VCR in the corner and slid in a tape.

Then he took the last chair in the room and focused on the screen.

Nika poked me in the ribs.

"I told you that you were going to see Gamsakhurdia," he chuckled, "I didn't say you were going to talk to him."

"Shut up, Nika," said Merab.

Like everyone else in the room, his attention was on the tube.

He was watching Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

He was watching a video on TV.

The president was sitting behind a low wooden table in a room with yellow wall-paper, wearing a dark grey double breasted suit.

He looked just like his photographs--a smallish guy with grey hair and large, sad eyes and a tooth-brush moustache, which is maybe why some people compared him to Hitler. He seemed poised, or at least not overly nervous, but he didn't speak for long.

Occasionally, there were murmurs of assent among the listeners in the room, but generally, aside from the President's voice, silence reigned supreme and I thought it best not to interrupt; I would ask for a translation later.

"What did he say?" I asked Merab when the three minute address was over.

Merab asked the man who had brought the tape to rewind it so we could translate it.

This is Merab's translation of Gamsakhurdia's first public announcement since his removal from power:

"On January 5th, in order to avoid further bloodshed, I, the legally elected president and the representative of legal government, left parliament in order to put an end to destruction and bloodshed. The change of place does not mean we have yielded. We represent the legal government of Georgia and I have not resigned.

"The new government tries to force deputies to call a new session of parliament to force it to illegally dissolution.

"I call to the deputies not to yield to blackmail and to not attend the session or meetings and not to shame themselves before the nation. And if the junta gathers them, it will be a false session.

"The Georgia people will not submit to the criminal junta, and must renounce their criminal actions at meetings and gatherings and establish resistance committees. We will never submit! Georgia is One!"

Then he called for a national strike and further acts of civil disobedience, called the Russians an 'army of occupation,' condemned the 'campaign of disinformation' that had suggested he had fled Georgia and then said that the contemporary situation was simply a continuation of the day in 1921 when the Russians invaded and ended Georgian independence.

"Tyranny and slavery are foreign to our national character," he said, "Fighting for true independence is our history and our fate."

Then it was over, for the second time.

"Well," I asked at last, "did he say where he was or when he made the tape?"

"He said he was in the country," Merab said.

"You forgot to translate that part," said Nika.

"Did he mention any dates?"

"No," said Merab slowly, "But the junta's call for parliament to meet was only made last week, so the tape was made sometime after that."

"Could have been today," Nika tried.

"Or five or six days ago," I noted.

"Well its better than nothing for you journalist types," snarled Nika, playfully.

He was right about that, although it was still pretty thin journalistic soup: I could see the banner headlines right then: 'The President of Georgia Speaks! (but no-one knows from where or when)'

So there was only one thing to do.

Sit down at the table in the room next door and commence eating an immense feast, the center piece of which was a young suckling pig.

Apparently our host was a distant relative of Merab's, and they had stumbled into each other earlier in the day and decided there and then that it was time to throw a bash. The Gamsakhurdia tape that someone had found or been given (it was never made quite clear) was mere icing on the cake. So we drank to Gamsakhurdia and we drank to kith and kin and we drank to democracy and freedom and we drank to all the usual things that people in Georgia toasted to. We drank to everyone in the room, but especially the ladies, who had prepared the fine meal.

Then I lifted my glass at the picture of Gamsakhurdia hanging on the wall and toasted the president and even those who had putched him from power because had everything been normal and fine as it should have been in Georgia, I should never have come here and thus never had met my hosts or my pals or the love of my life, Nunu, who was not even here in the room...

It was a pretty drunken toast, and didn't go over that well, especially the part about the putschists, but I think most of the people present understood what I was trying to say, no matter how badly I was slurring it.

I got a good-bye kiss on the cheek from Nunu the next day, and left Suchumi a happy man.

It was a fool's happiness, I knew, because I had just embarked on the most difficult part of my journey to Georgia--crossing the country in order to return to Baku.

This meant, of course, crossing the battle lines between the Position and the Opposition, but I figured that I would let that one sort itself out when I came to it.

The other problem was transport.

There was nothing left of the public system, and there were no Avis or Hertz outlets around for several thousand miles.

So I started hitch-hiking.

My first ride toward Zugdidi was in a car filled with bread.

Apparently, all the bakeries there were out of flour or fuel or both.

And when we arrived, it was looking pretty grim.

The prefectura building had by this time been utterly trashed; the bon-fire crowds had worked their way through the broken tables and chairs to the filing cabinets and book shelves and then books and ledgers of records. And when these combustibles had run out, they had taken to burning tractor tires. The square in front of the Prefuctora building was now pock-marked with black rings and weird hoola-hoops of roasted wire--the guts of the big tires that would not completely incinerate.

It was a mess.

And the loop was closing.

Quickly.

I fought my way up to Walter Shagua's office, but learned that he had already gone underground.

People were yelling and screaming at me, grabbing me by the arms and trying to lead me in five different directions at once.

The Opposition were all junked high on heroin, and forcing their way into the northern suburbs, where they had already commenced a horrible campaign of looting and rape.

No, they were advancing from the South, driving a wall of women and children in front of them; the Position could not shoot their own!

No, the column was coming in from the East--could I not hear the gun-fire in the distance?

So I had to flip a coin.

I chose the southern front.

I wanted to see this wall of captive women and children.

Finding a car was easy.

Finding one that ran was a bit trickier.

There was no more gas in the town.

Happily, I managed to spy a local cop I had met during my earlier swing through town, and so I grabbed him and made him hijack a car that ran.

Instantly, there were eight people in it, all determined to show me the truth about the cowardly Opposition who would stoop so low as to use human shields rather than fight like men.

There was chaos all along the road.

Groups of people were running this way and that; some carried shot-guns; other had sticks of dynamite hanging out of their great coat pockets; there was even the odd Kalashnikov to be seen. Here and there was a semi-trailer truck, carrying a chunk of building block cement to use as a barricade; here and there a dump-truck with one inch thick metal walls welded on the sides, making it into a poor man's APC, with shooting holes blow-torched through the armor.

"Georgian tank," chuckled the cop, whose name was Otori.

Then, as we clanked over some railway tracks, we found ourselves facing a wall of people moving our way.

"There, there they are, see!" screamed one of the guides from the back seat, "It's the human shield!"

It was no such thing.

They may have been terrified woman and children, but when we sliced right through them with the car, there was nothing behind them.

But we were getting ever closer to the front, and after about ten minutes, we started running into barricades.

Most were unmanned.

Then we were at the last one, and looking down a country road that crossed a small river via a small bridge.

It was not blown.

And on the other side stood three APCs with their guns pointed in our direction.

Closer inspection revealed that there were two machine gun nests on our side of the bridge, guarding it from sabotage.

The Opposition.

There were no women and children anywhere to be seen.

"Let's go say hello," I said to Otori.

"Why not?" he answered, "We'll say I am your translator."

It was crazy, but it happened so fast I couldn't really appreciate how crazy it was. To the amazement of everyone manning the last barricade, Otori and I put our hands on our heads and walked straight down the road to the enemy lines.

Then I noticed that the driver of our car was walking with us.

"We can assess their positions!" he hissed to Otori in Georgian who then hissed this fine idea to me.

"I only think we need to assess our route of retreat," I suggested, looking at the collected fire power on the far side of the bridge and reflecting on the pathetic defenses on our side.

Once within earshot, Otori shouted to the guys in the machine gun nest that I was a correspondent and wanted to talk with them. Word was passed back, I guess, and then someone walked across the bridge and signaled that we might approach. We did so. We had a quick conversation on the bridge with a young lieutenant from Tbilisi. He denied the rumors that his men were doped up and raping women and using children as human shields. He said he hated the fucking war. I said thanks, and then Otori and I walked back toward the Position lines, which looked even more pathetic than before.

Then something occurred to me.

The driver was no longer with us.

He had been taken captive, or had been caught spying, or--God only knew--planting a bomb on one of the APCs or placing a charge under the bridge.

There was only one thing to do.

He was my driver.

I had to go get him.

So I walked back toward the bridge with my hands over my head and when I got within shouting range I demanded that my driver be given back to me.

Baffled looks passed across the faces of the men in the machine gun nest.

So I just kept on walking and walked past the machine gun nest and across the bridge to where the APCs were parked and got a hold of some guy who looked like he was in charge and demanded, on general international principle and respect for the press, that my driver be delivered back to me, post haste, if he had not already been summarily executed.

I didn't actually say anything about this last bit, but I was rather concerned about it.

The stupid shit.

Then the amazing happened.

They actually produced the driver and gave him back to me.

The thought occurred to me then that maybe he had been less interested in assessing the enemy's defenses than telling them about our own, but never mind about that.

So we returned to the Position's positions and then to our car and we drove back to Zugdidi and the Prefectura.

The crowds in front of the building were now going really wild. Everyone was crowding around an exhausted and shell-shocked young man who had just brought in the latest: the anticipated attack across the bridge we had just returned from had been a ruse. The Opposition were massing to the East of the city and were about to march; there had already been a fire-fight out that way, with several Position defenders killed.

"Let's go," I said to Otori, and we hijacked another car and started down the grand processional avenue that led from the city square and Prefectura to the eastern side of town, where the avenue turned into the main highway to Tbilisi.

It was here, literally at the place where the 'Welcome to Zugdidi' sign had been erected, that we stopped.

Actually, only the car did.

There was a barrier that someone had erected, and behind it there were a bunch of people with shot guns and sticks of dynamite and mid-night special pistols.

They're coming, said at least two hundred people at once.

I don't see anyone, I said, let's go.

But the driver refused to go an inch further.

They're coming! said the chorus again.

Let's go, said Otori.

Okay, I replied.

After all, we had just done the same trick on the other side of town.

So like Clint Eastwood and Donald Sutherland in Kelly's Heroes, that WWII flick about greed and gold and mistaken heroism, we started walking down the road, now stretching empty off into the eastern distance.

The difference between old steely-eyes and his pal and us^{was}/that once again we thought it prudent to put our hands above our heads as we walked down the middle of the road.

boom...

There was a crack of something in the far distance.

boom boom...

Again the distant sound of someone else's battle.

Boom.

That one sounded a little bigger and a little closer and so I stopped walking.

So did Otori.

BOOM! boom boom BOOM!

I think we should go back, I said.

Probably a good idea, he replied.

VREEEE...vBRROOM!

A light cannon round had exploded in the street 100 yards away, and then all hell broke loose.

vBroom! vBRROOM!

tRing, tRip, tRizz!

Bullets were ricocheting off ^{the} Welcome To Zugdidi sign and whistling past our ears and Otori and I were suddenly eating asphalt, if such a thing is possible, and watching the brave line of defenders behind us run screaming and shrieking away.

Vreee VBROOM!

tRing, tRip, tRizz!

We were lying right in the middle of the road and suddenly, I knew what it is to be a sitting duck--or maybe a bowling pin in an alley is a better metaphor.

I couldn't make up my mind.

There must be several ways to describe the situation but none that really captured the moment.

I was about to get killed.

Now, I have been in many sticky situations, and quite a few foolish ones.

But had never stood (or laid) like a bowling pin in a shortening lane, ready to be mowed down by the combined fire power of whatever the Opposition had mustered for their assault on the town.

And then I realized that I had never been shot at before, not really, and that there wasn't really too much special about it.

I was a fool who had gone too far and the only people more stupid than me would be those who might somewhere erect a statue or a plaque or maybe just write an article or even just add my name to the list of brave journalists killed in action.

I wasn't brave.

I was just dumb.

"Afraid?" chuckled Otori, "You should have been with me in Tbilisi."

I was too petrified to answer.

tRing, tRip, tRizz!

Ping Ping! Boom POW!

A few yards away stood a hopelessly thin tree, the decorative kind that municipal governments plant along boulevards.

It was it and Otori made for it and I followed him.

tRing, tRip, tRizz!

Ping Ping! Boom POW!

The tree trunk promised some protection it also reinforced the bowling alley perspective of the situation at hand.

How many bullets could a trunk tolerate before it died?

How many 72 mm slugs before it collapsed?

How many cannon rounds before it disappeared?

And then came a darker thought.

The tree might give us marginal protection from the on-coming bullets and projectiles, but it gave us absolutely no protection from any return fire.

We were between the lines and totally exposed--and the lines were closing on us, at least from the on-coming direction.

The Opposition were serious.

They were going to take the town.

The only thing I could see that was in their way was us.

Running parallel to the street was a shallow drainage ditch, and beyond that a row of houses, partially hidden behind low walls.

I liked the thought of those walls.

It was time to make a break.

Otori went first, splashing through the slush and crud of the drainage gutter and making it to the nearest gate, which he then opened. I went next, hunkered down as the bullets squealed above my head, and dove for whatever inside the gate and wall would provide.

At least it wasn't the main street.

And then we were outside the bowling alley, if not far.

The first house we broke into had a plate glass window facing East.

That didn't seem like what we were looking for, so we broke into the house next door, which had a brick or concrete wall between us and the advancing Opposition.

We liked that a lot.

Actually, we didn't exactly break in, because the people were home and were not really that surprised when we lurched into their kitchen.

Maybe they thought we were Opposition, and about to occupy their house, and that they had better be nice to us or we would kill them.

But we tried to make it as clear as possible that this was not the case, that Otori was Position and I had no positions as a matter of general principle, but my sympathies, to the extent that journalists are allowed to have any feelings, were clearly with the right group in this unfortunate conflict, namely the Position, and it sure would be nice and decent of them if they could offer Otori and I a drink, and quickly.

This they did: Chacka--the infamous 180 proof fire water.

And they gave us lunch, too: more mamaliya, with a pork stew on the side to give it some taste.

It actually turned into a bit of a party, our waiting there for the lines to pass, with the addition of some of the neighbors (the people into whose house Otori and I had first busted into) who were equally thirsty. They, too, realized that the plate glass window looking East was not what one wanted to be looking through when an army rolled on the town from exactly that direction.

So we ate and drank an amazing amount in a very short time.

Nobody said this, but I think we all figured it might be our last meal.

When I asked the men why they weren't fighting, they gave me the honest, obvious reply: suicide is not a good defense policy, and the men had no weapons to fend off armor.

Then, with a rumble, the first Opposition tank came rolling by.

As we nervously peered out the door, the army of occupation nervously swung their guns around at us, waiting for a wrong move.

They were just as frightened as we were, not knowing what awaited them.

Then the whole column came tearing down the road--two more (rather antiquated) battle tanks, a few half-track sort of mobile guns, an artillery piece towed by a fuel truck and then finally and pathetically, one of the armored dump trucks used by the position as a poor man's APC, or as Otori was fond of saying, a 'Georgian Tank.' A big black dent marked one side of the vehicle, where a bazooka round or some other heavy shell had hit, but not pierced the one inch thick metal. I didn't want to think about what that sounded like to anyone inside the device.

Following the parade of Opposition armor were a couple of buses filled with heavily armed soldiers, and then a whole line of private cars of all makes, packed with a motley crowd of volunteers.

They were drinking champagne.

Zugdidi had just fallen.

The collapse was short and almost painless.

After the Opposition lines passed us, we sauntered out on the street and followed the column to where it had parked. I sought an interview the commander.

"Ah, I remember you!" chuckled the guard at the door when he saw me approach, "I had you in my sights today but didn't blow your head off because I saw you were a foreigner."

"How did you know that?"

"Your stupid hat."

I thought he might have been joking, but wasn't sure.

So I interviewed the commander and he told me that he had lost seven men that day and wasn't sure yet how many the Position had lost, although he of course used the word Opposition when talking about the Gamsakhurdia loyalist forces and Position when talking about his own.

Following our conversation, I went down to the local telephone exchange and, amazingly, found someone still working there. She assured me that all the lines to everywhere in the city, country and world were down, but I begged her to try, just once, for the memory of Gamsakhurdia. This she did, and almost miraculously, I managed to get a line through to Tibilisi and from there to Moscow. I stretched my luck and tried to get two numbers: the BBC and the Washington Post. I got the BEEB first and told Bridgette Kendal that I was in Zugdidi ('You're still there?' she asked; No, I replied, I had just come back) and that the city had just fallen. I thought that she might appreciate the tip. Then I got the Moscow bureau of the Post and managed to convince the nasty crowd of people working there that I had something to dictate.

They had no time to help, but after some sharp words they clipped me into their direct line to DC where I was put on a voice machine to file.

That night, I heard on the BEEB that 'unconfirmed reports' from Zugdidi suggested that the city had fallen, signaling an end to the Position resistance to the putschists.

About six months latter, I saw my copy in the Post, which began with the same tone, although after the first prevaricating paragraph where it was not clear where the news was coming from, they did run the piece at length, including reference to the 'Georgian Tank.'

I stayed at Otori's that night, but despite the curfew, we didn't stay indoors.

We went out once to check out a huge blaze at a sport's complex, torched by unknowns, and then a second time in order to find his younger brother, who was wandering around town with a grenade in his pocket, promising to start the partisan war that very night.

Otori asked for patience, and took the grenade away.

I left Zugdidi the next morning.

There was no longer any problem about crossing the lines.

The lines had crossed me.

I hitch-hiked down the road toward Tbilisi.

The first ride was with some putschist policemen, and they got me as far as Kutaiyisi, the city in the center of the country that was still digging itself out from under the worst blizzard of the century. The snow was pretty deep and I was happy to have my officer's boots on, even if they were two sizes too large.

From there I picked up a couple of short lifts, the most interesting of which was with truckful of Armenians, bringing in some supplies down from Russia to their homeland.

The two words I could understand from their conversation were 'Tashnak' and 'Arstach'--IE, the ultranationalist Armenian party and Karabakh, respectively.

I couldn't tell if they were praising or vilifying the party or what they had to say about Karabakh, so I thought it best to keep quiet about where I was really heading--Baku.

The truck overheated while climbing a mountain pass at dusk, so I abandoned the Armenians as they tried to melt snow with a blow-torch in order to refill the radiator and picked up a ride with a highway patrol man in a NIVA four-wheel drive jeep, who subsequently stopped a bus and put me on it.

We arrived in Tbilisi around midnight, *way after curfew.*

I checked into a local hotel near the television station, and then decided to brave the curfew to go scrounge for food and drink and smokes.

Somewhere on Rustaveli Avenue, the main street in town, I saw a sign announcing a cafe and went into a alley way looking for the entry.

It was closed.

But there was a light in a nearby window and so I knocked and was instantly taken in by a 63 year old former actress named Kati who turned out to be the owner of the cafe and who was willing to provide sustenance for the wanderer in return for being obliged to listen to her life story, after which I walked back to my hotel, undisturbed by the militiamen controlling the streets.

My room was fine--superb, given the circumstances.

If it wasn't warm, neither was it freezing.

More to the point, there was hot water.

I bathed for the first time in more than a week and washed my socks and underwear and then slid naked and clean into bed and slept like the proverbial log.

In the morning, I ventured forth for a daylight look at the Georgian capital.

I still felt like a complete bum.

My interior clothes might have been clean, but I was still dressed in pants and jacket that I had slept in for two weeks.

I was also stumbling down the avenue in the too-large military boots, which were fine for snow and slush but left something to be desired when used on pavement.

The alternative footwear were my too small sneakers.

I reflected on this state of affairs for a moment, and then decided that I had actually become used to life in the USSR.

I wore what I could find.

Finally, unable to stand it any longer, I walked into a Commercial shop, scanned the wares and plunked down enough rubles for a new shirt and tie.

The Russian attendant adjusted my tie and then announced that I looked great.

"Prekrasna!" she said.

She was lying just to make me feel good, I know, but the partial change of duds did partially change my attitude about life, and so I proceeded down the main street to take a gander at the war damage in city center.

It was pretty sobering--a swath of stately, turn-of-the-century buildings turned into the sort of burned out neighborhoods one usually associates with Central European cities at the end of World War Two.

The center piece of the destruction was, of course, the Presidential Palace.

Not only was it riddled with bullet holes and scorch marks, but whole segments of the columns decorating the facade of the building had been shot through, leaving dangling pieces of wire and cement swaying in the breeze.

What anger and hatred, what insanity had filled the hearts and minds of those aiming the cannons?

I had seen some of the Opposition fighting men in Zugdidi, and felt myself creeping closer to the idea that they had all been junked up on heroin like the Position people claimed.

Workmen were already putting in new windows in the palace--a project reportedly funded by the patriot, Edvard Shevardnadze--but it was clear as day that it would take a lot more than new panes of glass to erase the memory of late December, 1991.

But if the presidential palace had taken the brunt of the attack, adjacent building had suffered, too: the main telephone and telegraph exchange, a school, the Georgian Museum, the National Museum and behind it, the KGB center (totally gutted by a fire that reportedly destroyed some 25% of the documents inside). The stately old Intourist on a corner nearby had also been badly hit; another hotel project on Freedom Square still boasted doors bolted shut, although there were scarcely any walls left to hold up the door frames.

All in all, it was sickening--the more so because it was the scene of the battle that didn't really happen elsewhere.

And nor was all the action over.

After circling the destruction zone, I was making my way down a back street cluttered with shattered air conditioning machines and studying the still-smoldering ruins of the KGB building when I saw a crowd of people in the main avenue below: the daily, spontaneous demonstration passing in front of the palace.

I estimated their number at around 5,000.

'Down With The Army Of Occupation!' 'We Demand Our President' and 'Killers To Court' were some of the signs carried aloft by the crowd.

These were some pretty brave people.

In Zugdidi and Suchumi, demonstrating was not necessarily a dangerous profession.

But in Tbilisi, under martial law, the scar-marked buildings stood as reminders of what could happen to brick and bone when the shooting starts.

These were committed demonstrators.

And they weren't just impassioned Georgians.

One man I spoke with, a 42 year old engineer named Valeri Konstantinov, was an ethnic Russian who insisted that Gamsakhurdia's 'anti-Russian' statements were total lies.

All we want is a referendum, he said, and if the result is that the people don't want Gamsakhurdia, then he can go.

I followed the crowd around Freedom Square to their destination--the almost unscathed Government House behind the presidential palace, where the military junta has its offices.

The chanting continued and the called were familiar:

Zvi-a-de! and Serv Junta!

Then a window opened and then a second and the men inside the Government House turned on the fire hoses.

It almost turned the crowd of angry demonstrators into a carnival circus.

"See! See!" laughed a young woman who recognized me as a foreigner, and thus probably a journalist, "There are chemicals in the water! They sprayed me yesterday and I became giddy and had to sleep!"

Others soon gathered to tell me all about Saint Gamsakhurdia and the evil scrounge of the junta, detailing its crimes and sketching in exact detail the elements of the conspiracy started in Moscow that was designed to bring Edvard Shervadnadze back to power and Georgia back into the Moscow loop.

It was a familiar litany, and one that was probably true, but one that had become impossible to listen to.

Somebody else in the crowd was a journalist and said there was a press conference inside the building, and so I flashed my Azerbaijani credentials that suggested I had something to do with the Washington Post, and went inside, feeling vaguely criminal for having anything to do with anyone who worked there, doormen included.

Once inside, I discovered that the usually suspects had been rounded up for the function: Interfax, TASS, the Russian Information Agency (old Novosti), a stringer from CNN, VOA (I believe) and then a number of local journalists representing the range of Georgian radio, television and print media.

There was also a young American diplomat there for obscure purpose, which got me more upset than anything else because Yankee dips are such sticklers about protocol most of the time, especially about The Press attending certain functions (even receptions) where they were not specifically invited.

But here the dip or spook was passing himself off as a hack, or at least taking the liberty to crash a press conference.

It got even more queer because the fellow was trying to avoid me. I was the only person in the conference who used the English translator from Russian and Georgian, and I had identified myself as an American correspondent when I asked a question. But the fellow did not even bother to say hello until I ran into in the airport the next day, when, sitting cheek to jowl, I learned that he had just had dinner with my wife in Baku.

Maybe this had something to do with his reticence, although I choose to think of it in other terms.

Anyway, the collected journalists were also a peculiar lot.

They all seemed almost giddily anti-Gamsakhurdia, and as such, giddily anti-demonstrators.

No sooner were we seated and treated to a general overview of the situation by the panel of Military Council members (fat crocodiles to a man) than the speech making began.

Sir, a man from some magazine asked the Minister of the Interior, when are you going to start providing protection for journalists when they are attacked by irate and fanatical supporters of the Opposition?

Say what?

There was also a lot of other rhetorical, planted crap.

Is it true, Mr Minister of the KGB, that Gamsakhurdia actually served as an informant for your agency for thirty years and was in fact placed by your agency as a national leader in order to dupe the people?

Well, I don't know about that, the croc would reply, Of course I had nothing to do with the old security system, and most of its records were burned by the fanatical followers of the fascist, but on the level, I think there is reasonable doubt about Gamsakhurdia's motivations...

Is it true, Mr Chief of Police, that it was actually Mrs Gamsakhurdia who begged you to massacre the intellectuals last September, but that you refused?

Well yes indeed, I didn't think this subject would come up here, but I was shocked when the witch called up my assistant and begged him to beg me to tell the troops to mow down the intellectual elite of our country! Was it her or was it him? I can't say anything aside from this: I refused, and it was at that moment that I realized that the time had come to topple the dictator and killer of his own people. It was, I knew in my saddened heart, the time to rejoin the people. It was a mistake ever working with Gamsakhurdia in the first place, and I bow my head before the nation in shame...

It was all pretty disgusting, sitting there in that conference room with the fat crocs on the dais and the somewhat thinner crocs in the chairs all around me.

I went out to dinner with a young German studying law in Tbilisi who was also stringing for some German pubs, and heard more of the distressing same.

Although Gamsakhurdia had (in the German's words) displayed certain negative characteristics similar to former leaders of his country, there was no doubt in the man's mind that a very peculiar play had been staged, and that the stagemaster was, finally, that great, out-of-work co-architect of Glasnost and Perestroika, good ol' Edvard S.

The next day I went out to the airport to catch a plane to Baku.

It was not to be.

There was no fuel for any transport, save for a plane bringing a bunch of Austria skiers away from their dream vacation.

That was when I met the American diplomat who had had dinner with my wife.

And his pals, a 'pro-American' group in Georgia called the American Peace Group, or something. I do know it, but it might be indiscrete to spell it out.

They offered me the complete and total use of their facilities, including fax and telex and secretaries.

Spook front if I ever saw one.

That night I saw them all again--the Yankee dip and his escort--at the Miskheti Palace, having dinner, and I forced myself upon them just for kicks.

They didn't like it one bit, which made me happy.

The Miskheti Palace was an almost real First Class hotel, situated in the middle of Tbilisi and about as Un-Soviet as one could get.

Everything was in dollars, and premium dollars at that.

It was a favorite hang-out for foreign hacks during crisis periods in Georgia; I later learned that due to the curious pro-rating of the dollar in that establishment, a German television team had run up a bill of over \$10,000 in four days--and mainly on phone charges.

I wasn't staying at the hotel, just eating there.

I was tired of Georgia and just wanted out, and the Miskheti was the easiest out of all.

Cold German beer on tap, that sort of thing.

I returned to the airport the next morning.

Again, no flights anywhere, aside for another plane bringing another load of satisfied down-hill enthusiasts back from Georgia to Vienna.

They confirmed that skiing conditions at the Meskheti resort in the nearby mountains were 'excellent.'

I didn't give a shit.

I was just trying to get back to Azerbaijan.

I decided to proceed by road.

This was regarded as exceedingly dangerous due to the large number of bandits, and I was warned against it.

Again, my response was that I didn't give a shit.

I was just trying to get back to Azerbaijan.

So I went down to the long-distance taxi market.

The price, given the dangers, would be exorbitant.

Ten dollars, pro-rated in roubles, for the four hour drive to the Azeri city of Ganje, where I knew there was an airport.

If there was no plane, there were trains, and if no trains, there were cars. And if there were no cars there was always Rashit Bey, the killer cop responsible for the ex-Armenian town of Chaykent.

My driver turned out to be an ethnic Azeri.

I was hungry and couldn't think of the word for 'food' in Russian, and accidentally said churek--the word for food in Azeri.

"You speak Muslim!" he exclaimed, and it was old home week all the way to the border. I also got my ear filled with the problems of being an ethnic minority in Georgia.

Especially a Muslim minority, like the Azeris.

There were ~~half a~~ million of the buggers in Georgia.

Almost as soon as we began speaking 'Muslim' (Turkish) the familiar pigs disappeared from along the road side, to be replaced by sheep. And the pleasant 'typically' Georgian houses of Zugdidi, Suchumi and other towns I had passed through also underwent a not-too-subtle cultural transformation. The open balconies disappeared, replaced by outside, compound walls.

I was returning, had returned, to the Muslim world.

Finally, after an hour of driving through increasingly flat and denuded landscape, we passed the bridge over the Algit River and entered Azerbaijan.

There was some sort of customs post there, and a policeman stopped us--not to search our car, but hitch a ride with us.

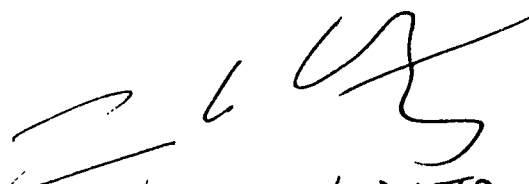
Due to the high level of banditry in the region, few cars passed the frontier.

I suspected, but could not prove, that this was because both sides were controlled by Azeris, in consort with one another.

Anyway, the two Azeris--one from Georgia and one from Azerbaijan--then began chatting away in a language I could understand, and I had the pleasure of being able to eavesdrop.

"How are things in 'blisi?" asked the cop.

"Bad, bad--bread is five manat (roubles)," said the driver.
"Five manat?!"
"Yes, and benzin is 100 manat for a two liter container. You can't find it at the pump."
"By God I didn't know..."
"Onions--20 manat for the kilo now. No cucumbers."
"The season is over."
"You couldn't buy them when they were around."
"Bad times."
"By God, filthy times. It wasn't like this before."
"You could go to Armenia and buy butter and cheese."
"You could do everything."
"Gorbachev."
"The dog."
"We lived well in the Bredzhnev days."
"Communists."
"Yeah, we lived well then."
"Do you know what we need?"
"Stalin."
"Yeah."
"Who is the infidel sleeping in the front seat?"
"He's a Turk."
"He's our brother."
"Don't disturb him. He has come from the war and is tired."
"Which war?"
"Our war."
"Yes," breathed the Azeri Azeri to his Georgian Azeri brother,
"Your war seems to be over, but our war has just begun."
He certainly was right.
I grabbed the flight from Ganje without a minute to spare and landed in Baku an hour later and headed straight home.
But I scarcely had enough time to kiss the wife and wash my filthy clothes than I was called into action again.
Only this time, the action was a lot closer to home.
It was a place in Karabakh called Khodjali.
The place I had been trying to write about to begin with.
Something really nasty had happened there.
The real roller-coaster ride had just begun.


Thomas GOLTZ
Baku, Azerbaijan